

# **Extent and Nature of Dacoity in Bengal Countryside, 1837-1863**

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## EXTENT AND NATURE OF DACOITY IN BENGAL COUNTRYSIDE, 1837-1863

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... in the districts afflicted with this dreadful social evil, no man, with property worth Rupees 200 in his house, can lay down to rest at night without the most vivid and well-founded fear, that he and his family will be awakened in the night by the assault of these merciless plunderers, who only omit to murder, as well as to rob, when the terror of their attacks has prevented all attempts at resistance.

From the onset of British rule in Bengal, the crime of dacoity which was termed "the most serious in character, the most vexatious in its immediate and remote effects of any that disgrace our calendar" plagued the rulers.<sup>1</sup> As such very stern measures were adopted with the establishment of British Courts in 1772 to stamp out this "daring," "demoralizing," "most dreaded," "most systematic," collective crime.<sup>2</sup> Warren Hastings and Lord Minto also enacted various legislations to fight out the menace of dacoity.<sup>3</sup> Although the latter was quite successful in bringing down the incidence of this crime, it, however, again showed a remarkable tendency to inflate in the 1840's. Even the districts surrounding the seat of government became infested with "desperate villians" and carrying torches to light them, break open treasures, without let or hindrance, and get off with their booty. The insecurity to life and property became so great that the government in the early 1850's had to institute a special agency to combat this "menacing evil." In this short article, however, an attempt will be made not to study the causative factors which led to its poroliferation or to study the structure and composition of these marauding robbers or to assess the results of the government's antidacoity drive but to critically analyse the mode of collection and compilation of dacoity statistics, their annual incidence and distribution in the various Bengal distircts. An attempt will also be made therein to explain the regional and seasonal variations of this crime. The nature or motivation which led to dacoity will be the subject matter of Section II of this essay.

1. "Our Judicial System, and the Black Acts," in *The Calcutta Review*, Vol. XIII (January-June, 1850), Calcutta, 1850, p. 348.
2. W. R. Gourlay, *A Contribution towards a History of the Police in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1916), p. 25.
3. *Ibid*, pp. 27-28, 39-40. See also, Anadswarup Gupta, *Crime and Police in India* (upto 1861) (New Delhi, 1974), p. 63.



### Frequency and distribution

It was claimed that strenuous exertions were made, especially from the year 1808 when the office of Superintendent of Police was first instituted to obtain the most accurate information of all crimes committed.<sup>4</sup> For that purpose, the magistrates were not exclusively dependent on their police officers for information, they were empowered to require all zamindars, and their local agents, as well as the Indian revenue officers of the government to communicate punctually of the occurrences of all crimes of magnitude. The tendency of the enactments was also to place magistrates on more intimate and frequent communication with the village police, and many other channels were said to be open and available to an active and vigilant magistrate for readily detecting and punishing any wilful and habitual concealment of crimes of which any of the police Darogahs might be faulty.<sup>5</sup> Besides, zamindars were also required to transmit directly to the office of the Superintendent of Police, by means of the *dawk*, a monthly statement, in a prescribed form, of all crimes committed within their respective estates. These reports were regularly compared with those received from the police Darogahs. The Superintendent also adopted "other measures" to ascertain the accuracy of the statements furnished by the local magistrates to the office. The result was said to be "generally satisfactory, and afforded just grounds to rely on the correctness of those periodical returns, so far at least the prevalence of crimes of magnitude."<sup>6</sup> Moreover, as one said, however strong and numerous the motives for concealment might be, there were still stronger impulses like the feeling of revenge, great loss, or personal injury under which the tale was actually at once told, without any calculation of contingent inconveniences.<sup>7</sup> There was also the fear of the punishment for abortive attempts at concealment. All these were thought to be sufficiently powerful motives to secure the requisite information of the commission of heinous offences.

In spite of all the elaborate arrangements and motives, however, the information in regard to the incidence of crimes of magnitude actually committed remained "very imperfect." Numerous reasons were adduced for such a state of imperfection.<sup>8</sup> The disinclination of chawkidars to go a long and wearisome distance on foot, for no other purpose but to report the occurrence of the crime to the police Darogahs and the disinclination of the Darogahs to communicate to the Magistrates information likely to bring upon them a good deal of trouble afforded strong presumptions in support of the opinion.

4. India Office Library and Records /henceforth IOLR/, V/26/150/1, *Report of the Committee on Improvement of Mofussel Police, Bengal, 1838* / hereafter referred to as *RCIMP, 1838* /, see minute by the Hon'ble W. Blunt, February 28, 1832, pp. 2-3.

5. *Ibid*, see also minute by R. Walpole and J. F. M. Reid, dt. May 18, 1832, pp. 12-13 in *Ibid*.

6. Hon'ble W. Blunt, *op. cit.*

7. Minute by Tattrat, dt. April 25, 1832 in *Ibid*.

8. *RCIMP, 1838*, p.6.



The presumption was rendered more strong by the fact that when a crime was committed, the individual injured by it, and all who had any knowledge of it, used their best endeavors to conceal it. This was partly due to the corruption and extortion of the police, which caused it to be popularly said that dacoity was bad enough, but the subsequent police inquiry very much worse.<sup>9</sup> The strong unwillingness on the part of the victim to prosecute was also due to the fatigue of a journey to the station of the Magistrate, in many cases exceeding a distance of 100 miles, to submit to the harassment of a daily attendance in the Magistrate Court, for weeks together, and to suffer all the inconveniences and often distress occasioned by a long absence from their homes; and interruption to their occupations. "They are so severely felt, that they are seldom voluntarily submitted to, it being in almost every case found necessary, in order to produce the attendance of those who are required to appear as Prosecutors and Witnesses, to seize or send them to the Magistrate's station under charge of Burkendazes, and while there to keep them under restraint, and sometimes in confinement on the pretext of accommodating them with loadings."<sup>10</sup> To add to these was the uncertainty of proceedings of the courts and the exceeding chances of escape which the provisions of criminal justice allowed to offenders, while the acquittal of a revengeful brute sometimes known to have led to unhappy consequences.

Non-reporting or suppression of dacoity cases also resulted from the absence of any definitive clause in the existing law as regards the number of persons required to constitute the crime of dacoity. To establish the crime of dacoity or gang robbery by open violence it was only necessary that a body of men should be shown to have banded together, with the criminal intention of committing dacoity, either with or without arms, by day or by night to have proceeded, by force of intimidation, to break into a city, town, village, dwelling house, tent boat or abode of any individual. and to have carried off, or have attempted to carry off from thence, such moveables, or property, as they may have been able to discover.<sup>11</sup> As such whether a particular dacoity constituted a dacoity or not very much depended upon the view taken by the Darogahs and the individual Magistrates concerned. But as commission of too many dacoities was reflection of the credibility of local officials, it was more likely that unless dacoities were of some magnitude, these remained unreported or were classified under lesser crimes like robbery, burglary and even theft.<sup>12</sup> The authors of the Indian Penal Code, introduced in 1860, however, removed this uncertainty, and it was decided that to constitute a crime of dac-

9. IOLR, V/4/19, parliamentary Paper, Vol. XXIX, 1857 (Sess. 2), HOC. Paper No. 198. Minute by the Hon'ble the Lt. Governor of Bengal, F. J. Halliday, dt. April 30, 1856.

10. RCIMP, 1838, p. 6.

11. See, Regulation LIII of 1803, Section III in IOLR, V/8/17, Bengal Regulations, 1796-1803, Vol. II (London, 1828); and *The Calcutta Review*, Vol. XIII, p. 348.

12. Annual Report relating to the Suppression of Dacoity in Bengal /henceforth called RCSD/, 1861, p. 12.



oity at least five or more persons would be required. There was also the fact that while the law reduced every act of the crime to a common level, wherever and under whatever circumstances committed, whether in house or village, field or jungle, on the highway or in thoroughfares, some officers did arbitrarily draw a distinction notwithstanding, and as arbitrarily excluded from their dacoity returns, robberies on the highway or in the open country; while others, again, as exclusively considered that where lighted torches had not been used, no real dacoity really took place.<sup>13</sup> Even in the case of reported attempted dacoities, not every case was included in periodical Returns but only those which were committed by organized gangs of dacoits and consummated and actually ascertained to have occurred.<sup>14</sup>

To what extent dacoity was concealed or went unreported is extremely difficult to comprehend. However, from confessions of offenders, rumours, hearsay, and unofficial reporting of such crimes, it is possible to form some judgement. The district of Malda, for instance, was "astonishingly free" for several years from robbery, and this was suspected by the Superintendent of Police to have been due to an extensive system of protection to criminals and concealment of crimes to which the officers of the police were a party.<sup>15</sup> That his apprehension was correct was proved a few years later from the statements of the Kechuks who confessed to have committed a large number of dacoities in that district in the past.<sup>16</sup> Again, in Rajshahi, the tale was not different. Zamindars were said to be engaged in concealing crime to a "considerable extent," especially in the Chowgaon and Bhowaneegunje thanas.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, in Hooghly district that many dacoities in the past were concealed were confirmed by the fact that, of the thirteen cases of dacoity confessed to by Mirtoonjoy Chung of Chunderkonah thana only six had ever been reported by the police. How extensively concealment was practised was also reported by the Dacoity Commissioner to the Government of Bengal when he pointed out that out of some three-hundred dacoities to which the approvers under him till then admitted to have committed, the records of only half could be verified, the remainder had been concealed by the people, by the landholders or by the police.<sup>19</sup>

If suppression of land dacoity was practiced extensively, it was almost the universal norm to do so in cases of dacoity on rivers. Every year a large number of boats, especially *mahajani* boats laden with merchandise went missing, and it was considered unlikely that these were all sunk or lost in the

13. *Ibid.*

14. *RCSD*, 1858, p. 41.

15. *Report on the State of the Police in the Lower Provinces* /hereafter referred to as *APR*/ for the First Six Months of 1841 (Calcutta, 1842), p. 44.

16. *APR*, 1844, p. 28.

17. *APR for the First Six Months of 1840*, p. 85.

18. *RCSD*, 1858, pp. 14-15.

19. Commissioner for the Suppression of Dacoity to Superintendent of Police, Lower Provinces. See, Letter dt. August 2, 1852 in *IOLR*, V/23/94, pp. 60-61.



stream, in which cases some traces of them could be found. The more probable supposition was that these were either plundered when stranded or sunk after plunder, after both of which instances the crews would disperse to avoid the inconveniences of detection by the police, if innocent, or the chance of detection if guilty of any participation in the offences.<sup>20</sup> The large Ganges and the Eastern Bengal rivers were said to be the vast water tracts where such crimes were committed "very extensively."<sup>21</sup> In Rajshahi, the mouths of the Baral, Jeeleghee and Mahananda were infested by river dacoits, and also they bore a very bad name for *Thuggee*. The offences were all said to be committed by local gangs, and that no "one-tenth of the offences committed along the Great Ganges" were ever heard.<sup>22</sup> In Tippera, the entire river navigation on the Meghna and parts of the Gumti remained unprotected and here not one-thirtieth of the offences of river *thuggee*, murder and plunder of property were reported.<sup>23</sup> In Mymensingh, dacoities were said to be "frequent" up the Jumna within and about Puccoola thana but these remained "invariably concealed" owing to the distance from the station and the difficulty of getting there.<sup>24</sup> In Faridpur, *thuggee*, sinking of boats by the crews for the sake of the cargo, plunder of stranded boats and dacoity and other such crimes of the rivers occurred but the police had no notion of these.<sup>25</sup> Dacoities on the large rivers in the Pabna district were also repeatedly committed but these were "never reported" to the authorities.<sup>26</sup> But the worst were probably the water tracts in the district of Bakergunge and around Khulna. An "immense" number of dacoities occurred on the river near Pirozpur but that little or nothing was said about them.<sup>27</sup> The Thannas Kewaree and Tugrah abounded with dacoits, and along all the villages on either side of the Ballessor, Damoodah and Kocha rivers were said to be infested with dacoits protected by "purse proud" zamindars.<sup>28</sup> That such non-reporting of gang robbery on the great water tracts of East Bengal was a common occurrence was also testified by George Plowden, the Commissioner of Burdwan Division when he said, "... from my own experience in the Eastern Districts of Bengal, I believed that the Government and the local Authorities had not the most remote notion of the extent to which River Dacoities, attended, if need were, with murder, were perpetrated, and had prevailed for years."<sup>29</sup> The Dacoity Commissioner's view was also

20. *APR for the Second Half Year of 1840*, p. 128.

21. *Ibid for the First Six Months of 1840*, p. 238.

22. *APR*, 1844, p. 29.

23. *APR for the Second Six Months of 1842*, p. 45.

24. *APR*, 1845, p. 35.

25. *APR for the Second Six Months of 1842*, p. 53.

26. *RCSD*, 1862, P. 29.

27. *Ibid*, 1861, pp. 32-33.

28. GOB. Proceedings in the Judicial Department, February 16, 1860, No. 9, PP. 329-333. See, Copy of Journal kept by Baboo Gooroo Churn Doss on board the Gunboat, No. 2; *RCSD*, 1861, pp. 32-33.

29. George Plowden Commissioner of the Burdwan Division to the Secretary, GOB, in GOB, Judicial, July 1863, No. 6, Appendix A, p. 6.



similar to that of the Commissioner that "a great number of river dacoities occurred on these rivers, which were never reported to the authorities."<sup>30</sup> Earlier, in 1852, the Dacoity Commissioner wrote to the Superintendent of Police of the confession of some eighty river dacoities and attempts at dacoity of which only three were ever reported.<sup>31</sup> The reasons for non-reporting of such occurrences, according to J. H. Reilly, the Dacoity Commissioner, were: "First, because the boatmen are generally strangers and cannot be expected to recognize the Dacoits, or afford the least clue to their identity; secondly, because the rivers fall so rapidly, and are navigable at only one season of the year; that the detention of a boat by the Police entails on them a greater loss than the Dacoity. Thirdly, because the Police investigation causes so much harassment on the boatmen that the *Mohajuns* find it difficult to procure boats to convey their goods if it is known that they suspect their boatmen to so dreaded an inquisition. Fourthly, because goods consigned in boats are insured by Native Insurers or "*Beemawallahs*," who stand the loss, and charge insurance in proportion to the risk they run."<sup>32</sup>

From the above discussion, it is abundantly clear that a great number of dacoities and attempted dacoities, both in land and on water, went unreported. Such limitations make the available data more of a sample than the actual state of criminal behaviour. Yet we must use these in the absence of other sources of statistical information and make up the deficiency with qualitative evidence available elsewhere. From Appendix I, it will be seen that the annual dacoity figures varied greatly from year to year. Starting with 317 dacoities and attempted dacoities in Bengal proper in 1843, the figures rose sharply till 1852 when it reached a peak of 786 or an increase of nearly 248 per cent in a decade. The figures thereafter gradually fell again every year (excepting 1861) till 1862 when the number came down to 268 only. In other words, the first ten years, 1843-1852, was a period of remarkable growth of collective criminal behaviour which were perhaps then bursting out due to gradual relaxation of the existing mechanisms of state control.<sup>33</sup> The reduction of gang robbery thereafter was due to the setting up of a special agency for the suppression of dacoity which, armed with extraordinary power, launched a vigorous drive to

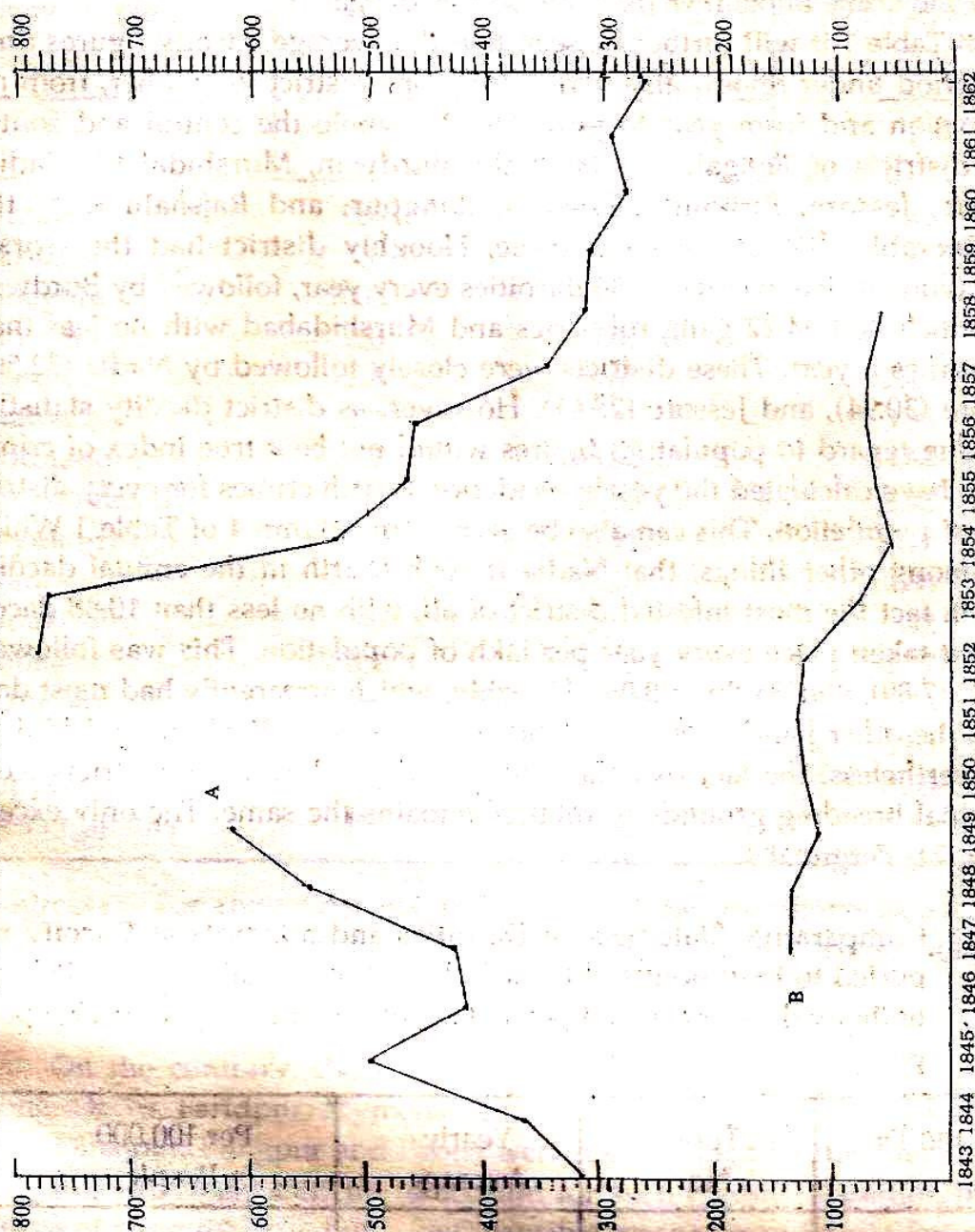
31. Letter from the Commissioner for the Suppression of Dacoity to the Superintendent of Police, Lower provinces, dt. August 2, 1852 in IOLR, V/23/94, Correspondence which led to the appointment of the Dacoity Commissioner, pp. 61-62.

32. *RCSD*, 1861, p. 11.

33. The vigilant magistrates who kept the village watch in some state of efficiency were forbidden to interfere in favour of chawkidars' grants and allowances; the experienced magistrates who also supervised over the Thannadari police were replaced by 'Boy Magistrates'; the expansion of River Police which was so urgently required was neglected due to inadequate budget grant; Darogahs were prohibited from making local inquiries regarding burglaries and thefts; corporal punishments of all sorts were abolished; security laws for good behaviour were rescinded; surveillance over bad characters given up; and necessary laws to proceed against receivers of stolen property were held up.



## ANNUAL AND MONTHWISE DISTRIBUTION OF DACOITIES AND ATTEMPTED DACOITIES IN BENGAL



A= Annual distribution of dacoities and attempted dacoities, 1843-49, 1852-62.  
 B= Monthwise distribution of dacoities and attempted dacoities, 1852-1855  
 for the districts as shown in Appendix II

Sources : Constructed as per Appendix I and II.



eliminate the crime altogether from the soil of Bengal.<sup>34</sup>

From Table 1 it will further be seen that the average dacoity figures during the period under review also varied from one district to another, from region to region and from year to year. On the whole the central and south-western districts of Bengal, viz, Hooghly, Burdwan, Murshidabad, Nadia, Midnapore, Jessore, Birbhum, Bankura, Rangpur, and Rajshahi were the most vulnerable districts. Among these, Hooghly district had the worst record, having on the average 55.56 dacoities every year, followed by Burdwan district which had 44.22 gang robberies and Murshidabad with no less than 35.78 dacoities a year. These districts were closely followed by Nadia (32.50), Midnapore (30.94), and Jessore (28.61). However, as district dacoity statistics without due regard to population figures would not be a true index of criminality, we have calculated the yearly incidence of such crimes for every district per lakh of population. This can also be seen from column 4 of Table 1 Which shows, among other things, that Nadia though fourth in the annual dacoity list, was in fact the most infested district of all, with no less than 10.88 dacoities having taken place every year per lakh of population. This was followed by Jessore (7.89), and Bankura (5.09). Hooghly, which apparently had most dacoities, on the other hand, was far behind Nadia, Jessore, Bankura and Midnapore. Nevertheless, the fact that the central and south-western districts were the principal breeding grounds of robbers remains the same. The only exception being 24- Pergunahs.

**Table -1 :** Comparative Statement of Dacoities and attempts at Dacoity reported to have occurred in each district of Bengal, 1843-39, 1852-62 with yearly average and percentage of the offence per 100,000 people.

Name of the Dt.	Total No.	Yearly Average	Per 100,000 People
1	2	3	4
Bakergunge	54	3	.41
Bankura	440	24.44	5.09
Baraset	222	12.33	2.36
Birbhum	481	26.72	2.57
Bogra	343	19.06	2.11
Burdwan	796	44.22	2.38
Chittagong	57	3.17	.32
Dacca	40	2.22	.37

contant

34. Iftikhar-ul-Awwal, "Anti-Dacoity Drive in Mid-Nineteenth Century Bengal," in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh*, Vol.



Name of the Dt.	Total No.	Yearly Average	Per 100,000 People
1	2	3	4
Dinajpur	286	15.89	1.32
Faridpur	38	2.11	.25
Hooghly	1000	55.56	3.65
Howrah	263	14.61	—
Jessore	516	28.61	7.49
Malda	274	15.22	3.53
Midnapore	557	30.94	4.64
Murshidabad	644	35.78	3.42
Mymensingh	110	6.11	.41
Nadia	585	32.50	10.88
Noakhali	45	2.50	.42
Pabna	202	11.22	1.87
Rangpur	436	24.22	.95
Rajshahi	429	23.83	3.55
Tippera	51	2.83	.55
24-Pergunahs	150	8.33	1.18

**Sources :** For annual dacoity and attempted dacoity figures, see Appendix I. District population figures obtained from Parliamentary Papers, Vol. XXIX, 1857 (Sess. 2), Paper No. 215 (HOC).

On the contrary, the Eastern Bengal districts, viz, Bakergunge, Chittagong, Dacca, Faridpur, Mymensingh, Noakhali, Tippera, and also to some extent, Dinajpur, Rangpur and Pabna were less troubled by this menacing evil.

It is extremely difficult to account for such regional variation in the incidence of gang robbery, but a few plausible reasons may be put forward as explanation. In the first place, some of the central and south-western districts were traditionally the habitation of turbulent, lawless freebooters. In this category fall the districts of Birbhum, Burdwan, Rajshahi, Nadia, Midnapore and Bankura. The district of Burdwan had a very unsavoury reputation from the early days of British rule for dacoity or gang robbery which was frequently accompanied with murder. Raina thana was said to be a haunt of the thugs and in 1817 they numbered over three hundred. Their descendents after the suppression of Thuggee, according to popular rumour, turned to dacoity as a means of subsistence.<sup>35</sup> The districts of Birbhum and Rajshahi also abounded in dacoits, estimated in 1989 to be no less than 2,000 including, of course, with

35. *Bengal District Gazetteers, Burdwan* (by J. C. K. Peterson) (Calcutta, 1910), pp. 162-63.



that of Burdwan.<sup>36</sup> The districts of Nadia also earned notoriety in the 18th and early 19th century, especially for crimes of gang robbery and murder. The vigorous efforts of W. C. Blaquiére, first as Joint Magistrate of Nadia and later as Superintendent of Police did much to reduce dacoity for the time being.<sup>37</sup> Midnapore was no less troublesome. Bands of *Sannyasis* or religious mendicants as well as the *Churs* (hill tribes who inhabited the jungle mehals and the tracts beyond them) kept the country in a disturbed state for some time.<sup>38</sup> In Bankura too, the *churs* created much anxiety in the last two years of the 19th century.<sup>39</sup> The land tenure system was also said to be one of the potent reasons which compelled many to adopt this unlawful means of gaining property. The districts of Burdwan, Hooghly, Bankura, Malda and such other districts where the subletting system (especially *putnee*) was much in vogue, left the peasantry with barely a minimum for subsistence.<sup>40</sup> Being exposed to similar economic hardship this had also the effect of turning some of the smaller landholders abettors and harbours of dacoits: "the subletting system . . . exposes . . . the minor Talookdars and Subholders, who receive themselves but little from the soil, countenancing and protecting the gangs, and with petty merchants . . . acting as their receivers."<sup>41</sup> Closely linked with the land tenure system was the question of fertility of soil and the availability of land. Large parts of some of the central and south-western Bengal districts were covered with jungle or were arid and rocky and hence unsuitable for cultivation. In this category falls Bankura, the physical features of a large part of which resembled those of the adjoining districts of Chota Nagpur, Midnapore, the west of which was covered with jungle;<sup>42</sup> Birbhum, which was interspersed with forests and bordering on the jungle mehals;<sup>43</sup> and Nadia, where the land had little fertilizing power and the incapacity of retaining moisture, the soil being light sandy loam.<sup>44</sup> Parts of these districts were, therefore, subject to occasional scarcities and famines. In contrast to this, the Eastern Bengal districts were extremely fertile, and land was also gradually being made available by clearing jungles. The recruitment of large bands of *lathials*, both by zamindars and indigo planters, in some of the districts like Jessore, Nadia, Murshidabad, Baraset, Pabna also contributed to increased dacoity in those districts. They not only frequently committed depredations in the neighbouring areas but also

36. *Ibid*, p. 162.

37. *Bengal District Gazetteers, Nadia* (by J. H. E. Garrett) (Calcutta, 1910), p. 120; *RCIMP*, 1838, Oral Evidence of W. C. Blaquiére, November 11, 1837.

38. *Bengal District Gazetteers, Midnapore* (by L. S. S. O'Malley) (Calcutta, 1911), pp. 108-09.

39. *Ibid*. Bankura, (by L.S.S. O'Malley) (Calcutta, 1908), pp. 106-07.

40. *APR*, 1853, p. 68; *Ibid*, 1844, p. 79; *Ibid*, 1843, p. 64; *Ibid for the second Half Year of 1840*, p. 110.

41. *APR*, 1843, p. 64.

42. *Bengal District Gazetteers, Midnapore*, p. 82

43. G. T. F. S. Barlow Speede, "The Criminal Statistics of Bengal as appearing from the Official Reports Between 1823 and 1843 at intervals of the Ten Years Each" (Calcutta, 1847), Appendix, p. XXXV.

44. *Bengal district Gazetteers, nadia*, p. 67.



on their way home when their services were no longer required. The indigo districts were thus exposed to this additional evil. Being contiguous to Bihar and the upper provinces, many professional dacoits from those areas were also in the habit regularly committing ravages in western Bengal, and not infrequently in some of the Eastern Bengal districts. In former years, dacoities were the terror of Hooghly, "Chiefly committed by bands from Behar and the Upper Provinces," remarked the Inspector-General of Police in his annual report of 1863.<sup>45</sup> The natural barrier created by the large rivers, especially Jumna and other water bodies possibly discouraged land dacoits of upper India to cross over to Eastern Bengal districts. Lastly, it is quite possible also that the Eastern Bengal dacoity figures were still more inaccurate than the rest of the province as great many dacoities in this part were committed on *mahajani* boats of which little or nothing was ever heard of.

In addition to regional and yearly variations, dacoity also varied with season. Although we do not have long-term comprehensive data for the whole of Bengal on this, the figures compiled by the Dacoity Commissioner's Office for the districts of 24-Pergunnahs, Baraset, Howrah, Hooghly, East Burdwan, Nadia, Midnapore and Jessore reflect the general assumption. It would appear from the figures (see Appendix II) that the first half of the year afforded the dacoits the best opportunities for perpetrating these offences. During this time of the year there was little demand for agricultural labour and the dryness of the country and the absence of standing crops facilitated rapid movement. Moreover, it was during this time that the better off among the village communities gathered the proceeds of the rice and cold weather harvests, either in money or jewels which offered a suggestive prey to this class of offenders. "The season when Dacoities and Robberies occur is when the rice crop is being cut, and the betel-nut gathered," writes J. R. Pughe in his Annual Report about Bakergunge.<sup>46</sup> During this time of the season, villagers also slept outside from the heat and house dacoits slipped indoors. On the other hand, during four months of the second-half of the year, the country remained almost under water, and in the last two months the crops ripening called for the labour of every available person. During these six months, therefore, there would seem to be little opportunity for perpetrating these offences.

### Nature of Dacoity

Most dacoities were committed in Bengal by robbers leagued together by the motives of idleness, of curiosity, of love of excitement and above all by a desire to plunder and live well. To an adventurous Bengalee, the lazy and comparatively luxurious life of a dacoit was most desirable. One or two midnight expeditions in a month in which there was virtually no risk, and he ob-

45. APR, 1863, p. 30.

46. *Ibid*, 1864, p. 26.



tained as his share a sum which would be a little fortune to his hardworking but honest neighbour. "If these dacoits are to be believed," wrote S. Wauchope, Magistrate of Hooghly, "their lives must be most delightful and congenial to the Bengalee dispositions. Two days' work in the month, and just enough excitement to make that work agreeable and exciting, plenty to eat and drink, abundance of time to sleep, spare cash when they want it, and numerous opportunities to exercise their natural chicanery and fraud. It is impossible to conceive any trade more seductive to a Bengalee."<sup>47</sup> Further, if the services of a *lathial* or a man armed with stick was required by any zamindar or planter the dacoit obtained immediate employ at high wages, and once having tasted the sweets of an indolent life he would hardly forsake it, but was ready at all times to join a gang and commit robbery. Dacoits, moreover, did not consider their profession a crime; on the contrary, they called a good sirdar dacoit a *matabor loke* ("respectable man") and a good robbery a splendid piece of business.<sup>48</sup> Sonatun Mundul of Burdwan, for example, was such a *matabor loke* who after a long career of dacoity retired to his village.<sup>49</sup> The demonstration effect of such notorious characters living in luxury in the midst of poverty could not but be detrimental in the long run.<sup>50</sup>

Besides the desire to live well, numerous dacoities were also committed during periods of scarcities and famines. Although during the period under study, Bengal was luckily not visited by any natural catastrophe effecting all parts of the province all at once, yet there were occasionally localized or regional crop failures due mainly to drought leading to sudden influx of gang robbery with open violence. Such localized crop failures occurred in 1839 in western Bengal districts of Burdwan, Bankura, Midnapore and Hooghly; in 1845 in Bankura; in 1850-51 in Nadia, Murshidabad, Birbhum, Bankura and Burdwan; in 1853 in Rahshahi and Bogra.<sup>51</sup> On the other hand, there had been a great rise in the price of food stuffs in the district of Burdwan in 1857-58; in Bakergunj in 1858; and in Nadia in 1862 owing to the scarcity caused by the failure of crops from inundation; and also from the unsettled state of the district owing to the indigo and rent disputes.<sup>52</sup> The districts so effected almost always showed a very considerable increase in dacoity figures (see, for example, the 1852, 1853, 1858 and 1862 dacoity figures in Appendix I). Commenting

47. S. Wauchope. Magistrate of Hooghly to Superintendent of Police, Lower Provinces, dt. January 31, 1852 in *IOLR*, V/23/94.

48. Wauchope to Superintendent of Police, dt. August 9, 1851 in *Ibid*.

49. "He has built himself a comfortable two-storied house, and when arrested, was a leading man in his village." *RCSD*, 1855, p. 14.

50. A correspondent thus wrote: "the promised protection of Government has not been extended to those who are peaceably disposed, and many a man has been driven to join the rebel dacoits by the knowledge that they are revelling in plenty while the well-wishers of our rule are starving . . ." *The Times/ of India/*, December 30, 1858, p. 7.

51. *APR for the First Six Months of 1840*, pp. 176, 182, 191, 202; *Ibid*, 1845, p. 64; *Ibid*, 1851, pp. 51, 54, 57, 59, 62; *Ibid*, 1852, pp. 55, 58, 61, 63; *Ibid*, 1853, pp. 28, 36.

52. *GOB, Judicial*, April 14, 1859, No. 114, p. 242; *BAR*, 1857-58, p. 57; *RCSD*, 1861, p. 25.



on the "great increase" in the crime of dacoity in the first six months of 1840 in Midnapore, the Police Superintendent observed that : "The dacoities were in general committed to procure temporary relief from starvation, and that they were not the premediated results of a combined gang."<sup>53</sup> In April of the year, he found people in Midnapore subsisting on wild fruits, half-ripe mangoes and such small quantities of rice as they could procure<sup>54</sup> The distress was more extended in Bankura where the increase of dacoities had arisen "entirely from the number of persons almost perishing from want, who were driven to crime for the means of obtaining temporary relief."<sup>55</sup> In such distressed coinditions, the object of so called dacoits was to get hold of food grains. Thus when there was an increase in dacoities in Bankura due to failure of crops for three consecutive seasons, "in almost all the dacoities articles of food, *dhan*, *ghee*, *oil*, *dhal* were amongst the plundered property."<sup>56</sup> The case was not different in the same district in 1851-52, where there was a severe drought leading to almost total destruction of crops. "In many of the cases entered as dacoities, nothing but articles of food were carried off, and the prisoners averred that their sole object was to procure food."<sup>57</sup> These grain robberies were perpetrated by marginal groups including the local police *Ghatwals* and *Pykes* who depended on the produce of the service lands and suffered in the same degree as other people.

Dacoities were also committed through motives of revenge rather than for the sole purpose of plunder or hunger. Their relative percentage to the total number of dacoities are not, however, fully ascertainable. According to one report, out of fifteen dacoities ascertained to have occurred in the district of Nadia in 1858, five were committed through motives of revenge of one kind or another.<sup>58</sup> Revenge dacoities mostly took place due to personal enmity and quarrel regarding land. The extent to which people sometimes would go to wreck vengeance due to personal enmity will be evident from two Nadia cases, in which two *gomastahs*, one in the employ of a large zamindar and another of an influential and opulent resident of Tezpur were sentenced each to fourteen years imprisonment.<sup>59</sup> On behalf of their employers, they had led

53. *APR for the first Six Months of 1840*, p. 191. Not only in Bengal but in England also rural crime varied with changes in the price of food and, according to one study, "over the short-term the correlation is perhaps even clearer." J. M. Beattie, "The Pattern of Crime in England, 1660-1800," in *Past and Present*, No. 62 (February, 1974), pp. 87-92. See also, Roger A. E. Wells, "The Development of the English Rural Proletariat and Social protest, 1700-1850," in the *Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (January, 1979), pp. 115-139; Alan Booth, 'Food Riots in the North-west of England, 1790-1801', in *Past and Present*, No. 77 (November, 1977), pp. 84-107.

54. *APR for the First Six Months of 1840*, p. 191.

55. *Ibid.* P. 182.

56. *Ibid.* 1845, p. 64.

57. *Ibid.* 1852, p. 61.

58. *Ibid.* 1858, p. 23.

59. *Ibid.* 1856, pp. 23-24.



gangs of *lathials*, one, all the way from the cutcherry close to Santipore to Lokefool, on the borders of Jessore, to plunder the house of a resident who had given them offence. The man plundered was left literally a beggar. The case against Khondkar Nusseerooddin Ahmed alais Nasroo Mia of Tezpur was similar. He owed a grudge to another rich *Mussulman*, the *Maulave* of Bankura, whose family residence was at Chowgurreah, near Culna. with the assistance of dacoits, property valued at rupees twelve thousand was carried away from his residence. Another case, though for different reasons, occurred in Burdwan. Sona Faqueer, one of the principal leaders of the Faqueer gang who was arrested through the instrumentality of Kheto Jemadar in February, 1853 managed to escape with another approver of his gang, Goohee Sheikh from the Dacoity Commissioner's establishment in November, 1853. Sona's first care was to go and plunder the house of Khetoo (in thana Gangoor, Burdwan). The house was cleared of everything—not that there was anything worth having; but to punish Khetoo, whose father, mother, and sisters were also cruelly ill-used. The night after, Khetoo's uncle was similarly treated. On these two nights, Sona himself told khetoo's father and uncle, that he had come to pay them off for getting him arrested.<sup>60</sup> But of all the revenge dacoities, quarrel regarding land was the source of most of them. In some instances, dacoits were hired, as in the case of Rahmoo Durzee who was attacked by the gang of Haro Sirdar upon instructions given by his opponents with whom a dispute was going on for the possession of land and tanks.<sup>61</sup> But the most violent and fierce dacoities arising out of land disputes took place between zamindars and indigo planters. In one case, the residence of Mr. & Mrs. Kenny was surrounded by an overwhelming mob according to the orders of one of the female proprietors of the Begumabad estate in Pabna. In this incident, the Darogah was killed and the Joint Magistrate was disabled by his horse falling on him. Ultimately, he had to retreat into the house and send for further reinforcements from planters and zamindars.<sup>62</sup> In another case, the hired employees of Trip, Manager of the Malleat factory in Pabna headed by the *gomastah* attacked the houses of the *jotdars* and c. of Bilcolah and Hossain gurah. Such disgraceful acts of violence, unfortunately, were "not uncommon in the district."<sup>63</sup> Revenge dacoities sometimes also took place through the instrumentality of dismissed or discharged employees.<sup>64</sup> Some strong elements of rural social protest are also discernable in Bengal during this period. Dacoity targets against oppressive landlords, indigo planters and their hirelings; professional money-lenders; or men of substance who came to be hated for one reason or another brings the point home. Of the oppressive landlords, we have the example of Joynarain Ghose of Bakergunge, Poran Ghose of Hoogh-

60. *Ibid.* 1855, pp. 12-13.

61. *Ibid.* 1854-55, p. 110.

62. *APR.* 1848, pp. 27-29.

63. *Ibid.* 1847, p. 26.

64. *ibid.* p. 24.



ly, and the Rajah of Mysadul of Howrah to name a few. Joynarain Ghose's residence was attacked by his *raiyats*, stated to be no less than eight hundred Farazees. "They were not instigated," as the Superintendent of Police later said, "by a desire of plunder, but of revenge for the oppression and extortion practiced on them by this zemindar; . . . the zemindars appear to have done everything which could degrade these men, their religion and their femalesex."<sup>65</sup> Similarly, the *raiyats* of Poran Ghose hated him for having ill-used them. As such they hired a gang of dacoits with the intention of murdering him. The gang while committing the dacoity unfortunately by mistake killed his brother. A few months later, however, Poran Ghose himself was ultimately killed.<sup>66</sup> The oppression perpetrated on the *raiyats* by the Rajah of Mysadul led to a dacoity, thought to have been committed by his own tenants. In this dacoity, one of the Rajah's *durwans* was murdered and property of considerable value was carried off.<sup>67</sup> Oppressive zamindari *amlahs* were also not spared. In one case, in 1858, the sole object of the gang was to murder a village *gomastah* who had harassed and persecuted them.<sup>68</sup> In another case, a *gomastah* of an indigo factory of Rangpur was robbed upwards of thirteen thousand rupees in cash, gold *mohurs* and jewels.<sup>69</sup> Money-lenders who frequently charged exorbitant rates of interest and through fraudulent book-keeping often ruined the lives of *raiyats* were also subjected to dacoity assault. Towards the close of 1849, for instance, a dacoity occurred in the house of a "notorious moneylender" of Rajshahi, whom the dacoits murdered. The whole operation was planned and executed by the *raiyats* who were in his debt, and from whom he used to extort the most usurious rate of interest.<sup>70</sup> The fate of a dismissed police Jamadar was no better, as he was "very odious to the *ryots* of his village, in consequence of his violent conduct towards them."<sup>71</sup>

## Conclusion

In spite of government's claim of correctness of periodical returns of crime, we may not consider official dacoity figures anything more than a sample. Various reasons like the disinclination of chawkidars to travel a long and wearisome distance to report occurrences of dacoity; disinclination on the part of the police officers to report crimes for fear of official wrath; concealment of dacoity by people due to corruption and extortion of the police, trouble of

65. It has to be remembered that till 1861 even open revolt, sporadic risings, riots and the like by a body of men could be classified as dacoity (under Regulation LIII of 1803) according to the sweet will of the authorities concerned. For Police Superintendent's version of the Farazi attack, see *APR for the First Six Months of 1842*, p. 53.

66. *RCSD*, 1854-55, p. 106.

67. *APR*, 1852, pp. 71-72.

68. *RCSD*, 1858, p. 23.

69. *APR*, 1844, p. 34.

70. *Ibid.* 1849, p. 26.

71. *Ibid.* 1851, p. 70.



prosecution, uncertainty of court proceedings, and not the least the fear of retribution in case of acquittal of offenders; non-reporting by landholders (who had probably a share in the plundered property); and the absence of any definitive clause in law regarding the number of persons required to constitute the crime of dacoity—all these factors led to considerable concealment or non-reporting of cases of dacoity in Bengal countryside. Non-reporting or suppression of dacoity was definitely greater in cases of river dacoities due to additional difficulty of getting there, especially during rainy season.

Dacoity then was chiefly a menacing evil of the central and south-western districts of Bengal. Apart from possibly more inaccurate information regarding dacoities committed in the vast riverine tracts of eastern Bengal, the causes for the unusual proliferation of dacoity in central and south-western districts may lie in the nature of the people of some of these districts; the economic hardship brought about on the small, marginal and some of the petty talukdars by the *putnee* system; the infertility and unavailability of land in some of these districts, the recruitment of too many *lathials* in the indigo areas; and the proximity of central and south-western districts to criminally prone areas of the United Provinces and Bihar. Most of the dacoities in Bengal during this period, it may also be noted, were committed during the first half of the year due to seasonal unemployment and underemployment during this period, dryness of the country, the absence of standing crops, the unavailability of cash money, and the easy access inside villager's homes as they slept outside to escape from summer heat.

The motive or impulse which drove people to this heinous crime was mainly the love of excitement and curiosity together with a desire at the same time to plunder and live well. However, there was a very strong element of rural social protest discernible in some of the so called dacoities. Occasionally, seemingly passive people, not ordinarily dacoits, were forced to resort to looting of houses for procuring foodstuffs for the sake of survival. At other times, they took to dacoity to punish, and even to murder, oppressive landlords and indigo planters and their *amlahs*, money lenders and offensive opulent people. This was the ordinary people's way of doing justice—a social protest, though entered in the official records as dacoity.



## Appendix-I

Statement of Dacoities and Attempts at Dacoity Reported to have occurred in Bengal Districts 18-43, 1852-62.

District	1843	1844	1845	1846	1847	1848	1849	1852	1853	1854	1855	1856	1857	1858	1859	1860	1861	1862	Total
Bakergunj	3	1	2	1	2	2	2	1	0	1	1	4	5	11	7	3	4	4	54
Bankura	7	11	29	16	10	19	27	103	43	27	42	24	29	10	19	11	12	1	440
Baraset	16	19	11	11	7	16	38	48	23	10		3	5	0	5	4	1	0	222
Birbhum	20	22	24	13	8	17	18	51	69	38	24	31	19	51	33	16	11	16	481
Bogra	5	10	13	9	6	10	18	17	35	30	58	21	12	26	21	13	31	8	343
Burdwan	35	53	73	67	70	82	105	80	67	62	27	12	20	20	13	2	4	4	796
Chittagong	2	4	3	0	1	3	0	0	5	0	2	4	0	4	16	0	6	7	57
Dacca	1	4	2	1	4	1	4	1	1	1	4	0	2	3	3	5	3	0	40
Dinaipur	11	2	23	3	17	16	19	5	27	17	17	17	8	7	23	19	29	25	286
Faridpur	2	1	5	3	1	2	1	4	2	3	0	1	2	6	2	0	0	3	38
Hooghly	30	63	97	63	68	93	78	163	95	61	33	41	30	27	25	25	23	12	100
Hawrah	15	16	21	33	23	28	26	40	27	9	5	3	4	1	2	3	4	3	263
Jessore	29	22	33	35	24	23	26	23	43	44	68	62	12	15	5	10	25	16	515
Malda	7	10	5	5	8	7	6	25	47	25	9	31	18	14	16	20	10	11	274

(contd.)



District	1843	1844	1845	1846	1847	1848	1849	1852	1853	1854	1855	1856	1857	1858	1859	1860	1861	1862	Total
Midnapore	36	23	25	34	64	57	48	29	37	27	15	20	16	15	21	19	24	48	537
Murshidabad	30	25	30	15	19	16	38	63	58	33	54	65	50	29	27	37	31	24	644
Mymensingh	7	2	0	3	3	2	1	8	2	12	3	8	9	9	7	11	8	15	110
Nadia	8	29	35	31	43	86	86	67	71	41	23	8	10	15	9	5	6	12	585
Noakhali	2	0	0	3	5	12	3	0	0	0	0	0	5	4	3	2	1	5	45
Pabna	9	5	7	26	9	5	9	9	17	19	14	19	14	6	13	18	2	1	202
Rangpur	4	4	8	8	5	11	17	36	34	39	33	47	48	31	28	27	33	23	436
Rajshahi	29	26	36	20	11	17	31	27	60	27	26	30	27	9	9	25	11	8	429
Tippera	2	1	5	2	4	4	2	2	4	1	2	3	2	2	1	5	5	4	51
24- Pargunahs	7	8	13	13	14	20	12	11	7	2	5	3	0	1	5	1	10	18	150
Total	317	362	500	415	426	549	615	786	774	529	468	459	347	316	313	280	294	268	8018

Sources: Figures from 1843 till 1849 from Report on the Statistics of the Police in the lower Provinces (various years, published from Calcutta); from 1852 till 1861 from RCSD, 1861, Table 2, p. 38; and 1862 Figures from *Ibid*, 1862, p. 3



## Appendix-II

Monthwise Distribution of Dacoities & Attempts at dacoity reported to have occurred in the Districts around Calcutta, in the years 1852-1855.

Month	1852	1853	1854	1855	Total	Amount of Property (in Rs.)	Av. amount per (in Rs.)
January	39	36	36	25	136	19,672	145
February	47	37	30	22	136	26,310	193
March	35	33	32	12	112	16,990	152
April	36	46	28	15	125	25,029	200
May	45	39	21	25	130	21,991	169
June	54	43	15	14	126	17,772	141
July	22	31	13	12	78	15,104	194
August	23	13	9	7	52	7,270	140
September	26	13	16	11	66	5,323	81
October	25	19	15	13	72	4,956	69
November	27	21	15	08	71	16,228	229
December	18	18	10	15	61	26,894 *	441*
	397	349	240	179	1165	2,03,539	175

**Source:** IOLR, V/23/96. See, RCSD, 1855. The districts concerned were Twenty-four Pergunnahs, Baraset, Howrah, Hooghly, Burdwan, Nadia, Midnapore and Jessore. In one dacoity in Midnapore in December, 1854, an amount of Rs. 16,377/00 was carried away. If this dacoity is omitted, the average stolen figure for December would be Rs. 175. See, RESD, 1855.